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ABSTRACT

The Victorian and Edwardian British cared deeply about what their children were reading. While some feared that unsuitable literature would ruin both the children of the nation and the nation itself, many viewed the power of reading as a key to boundless imaginative and intellectual opportunities. This book examines the role of child literacy in Britain's immense social, economic, and political transformations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Drawing upon recorded histories of childhood, education, literacy, and literature geared toward children, the book reveals how the British perceived books as a potent influence on the identity of their children. It also shows how a widespread preoccupation with the leisure reading of middle-class children resonated with debates about the readings assigned in new publicly-funded school for lower-class children. Part 1 of the book is devoted to autobiographic memories of British childhoods lived between 1860 and 1914. Part 2 examines the role children's literature played in forging a middle-class consensus that childhood was a uniquely innocent, imaginative stage of life. Part 3 is devoted to elementary education in London, which was a lightning rod for controversies over the content of curricula and the physical conditions of students. The book's chapters are: (1) "'As through a Telescope Reversed': British Childhoods, 1860-1914"; (2) "Reading Lives and Lives of Reading"; (3) "'Real and Wholesome Pleasure': Critics Guard the Boundaries of Children's Literature"; (4) "Creating a Magazine World"; (5) "'Another Ladder Altogether': Writing for Children"; (6) "An 'Efficient and Suitable' Elementary Education"; (7) "Overpressure in London's Board Schools, 1883-1884"; and (8) "'A Power of Reading': 'The Key to All Knowledge.'" Contains an index and approximately 156 references. (EV)

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